

June 20/2017

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June 20, 2017

Ms. Jill Ramirez
Chair
Hispanic Quality of Life Commission

Via email

Dear Jill:

On behalf of all of us at American Gateways, I write to ask the Hispanic Quality of Life Commission to consider making immigrant legal services a priority issue for the Commission and request that the Commission include an agenda item at its next meeting to discuss a request for funding.

American Gateways provides access to justice for impoverished immigrants in Central Texas; we see the need that our immigrant community faces every day in accessing immigrant legal services. We strive daily to fulfill our mission, which is to champion the dignity and human rights of refugees and immigrant survivors of persecution, torture, conflict, and human trafficking through exceptional immigration legal services at no or low cost, education, and advocacy.

Over the past 30 years, American Gateways has become an indispensable legal services provider for low-income immigrants in Central Texas, and is considered one of the most effective and efficient providers of immigration legal services in the nation. Each of our clients is at or below 200% of the Federal Poverty Guidelines and without the help of American Gateways, would not be able to afford legal representation.

We are also the only non-profit in Texas to serve 4 major detention centers, providing legal orientations, Know-Your-Rights presentations, pro se assistance, and legal representation on a regular basis at the detention centers in Karnes, Pearsall, Taylor (Hutto) and Dilley Texas. We also run the Immigration Court Help Desk in San Antonio to provide assistance to pro se non-detained low income immigrants in removal proceedings.

Our staff also identifies and takes on as many cases as we can for full representation, either through our in-house attorneys or our strong pro bono partnership with the private bar. We are committed to providing our legal services to those families who may be too poor to access private legal help.

With our vast pool of volunteers, we are able to help a number of individuals very efficiently. We have more than 120 volunteers who provide translation and interpretation services for us, including a number of different languages. And we have more than 100 lawyers who donated nearly 1600 hours in pro bono legal services representing our clients. We also coordinate with the outstanding network of other legal services providers in Texas.

With the current climate on immigration at the state and federal level, the need for our services is more important than ever. Unfortunately, we must often turn away between 75 to 100 individuals a month who seek our services. We are also seeing an increase in the number of individuals who need deportation defense or consultations to avoid deportation. Without additional funding, low income individuals and families will not be able to access the protection and services that they need.

Because of this need, we ask the Hispanic Quality of Life Commission to consider including a request for immigration legal services in its budget request to the City of Austin. Funding for free legal services to low income immigrants in Austin could allow an agency like ours to provide outreach, consultations, and much needed legal services.

We recognize and appreciate all that the City of Austin is doing to stand up for immigrants in Austin. However, specific City of Austin funding for legal services is vitally needed in order to provide more desperately needed immigration services, especially during the current hostile climate for immigrants.

Please feel free to contact me at rebeccal@americangateways.org. Thank you for considering this request.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Rebecca Lightsey". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Rebecca Lightsey
Executive Director